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Postville reeling after raid

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer and DENNIS MAGEE, Courier Regional Editor

POSTVILLE -- Monday's federal immigration raid damaged Postville's schools, businesses, neighborhoods and the fragile relationships forged between the city's diverse cultures, upset residents say.

Community members say they don't understand what the biggest immigration raid on a single site in U.S. history accomplished, if anything.

"Drive around Iowa and there's a lot of dead towns," businessman Gabay Menahn said. "Here it's the same thing, but we've got a heart beating -- it's called Agriprocessors. When you take away the heart, the body dies."

Federal agents arrested 390 workers at Agriprocessors, the nation's largest kosher meat processing plant.

Many in town dealing with the aftermath on Wednesday said the raid took away fathers and mothers who only wanted to be left alone to support their families and replaced relative harmony in the community with fear and suspicion: Rumors floated through town about unmarked Immigration and Customs Enforcement vehicles on patrol and about car chases and shootings in the wake of the raid.

Volunteers at St. Bridget Catholic Church, where many from the Hispanic community are staying, said many people from the community dropped off food and clothing.

Travis Seibert, a businessman who shares an office with Menahn, said the population was maturing, replacing young single men -- who tend to cause trouble no matter their ethnic origins. In their place in recent years, hardworking Hispanic families had moved in.

"Over the last few years, we got where the plant was a lot more oriented towards families," he said. "People got along really well. We saw them as neighbors and friends."

Many of those are gone now, he said.

Before Monday's raid, Seibert said, the economy in Postville, population 2,300, was strong. Property values were rising.

Postville's main street had but one vacant building, which opened up only recently.

Some Hispanic storefronts are shuttered, and homes and apartments were abandoned. At GAL Investments, which owns 127 rental units, Menahn said the vacancy rate soared to 75 percent after Monday's raid. With \$50,000 monthly payments to make, the company's loans must be frozen to avoid bankruptcy, he added.

Some say the town will struggle but eventually recover. Others claim the raid represents a fatal blow.

"Postville is going to go to hell," Mary Ramos said.

She was picking up the belongings of three friends at an apartment complex in the southeast corner of Postville. She said the trio, exhausted and hungry, arrived on her doorstep Monday night 75 miles away in Dubuque.

"I said 'Oh my gosh, what are you doing here?' They said, 'We ran. We jumped out of the second-story window and we ran.'"

Picking through their personal effects, Ramos told two other women with her to pick up the men's shoes and see if there was room in the car for a microwave. They cleaned on the refrigerator, but left many other items, including mattresses and folding chairs.

Shuffling through a drawer, Ramos found a few pay stubs. Bold letters on the check read "AGRIPROCESSORS, INC. Thanks You." Each showed all three men were making within 25 cents of Iowa's minimum wage.

"Moises was making \$7.25 an hour after three years of work," Ramos said.

After a press conference at St. Bridget's Church, Sister Mary McCauley said Agriprocessors bears responsibility for helping create the present situation. She cited safety violations, inappropriate working conditions, long hours and claims the company ignored workers' physical needs.

Despite such allegations, though, many in the community on Wednesday were more likely to blame ICE agents who conducted the raid and politicians who have yet to implement an effective immigration policy.

Dixie Starkey said plenty of the burden should go toward the illegal aliens and the plant's owners. She was moving into a rental property after she found a home that housed two Hispanic families until Monday. In their rush to leave, the families left behind baby bottles and furniture, which the landlord cleared out.

"They got what they asked for. They came here illegally, and knowing they were here illegally, they bring their families over here illegally," she said. "Agri knew they were illegals. It's Agri's own tough luck, too."

Even so, Starkey acknowledged the plant's absence would likely hurt the town, if only temporarily.

"Let's hope Agri can pick up and go on with what happened," she said.

Laverne Wedo, 79, a longtime resident, also blamed the illegal workers and plant owners. He said he assumes everyone in town, including the plant's owners, knew illegal aliens worked in the plant.

"I feel kind of sorry for them in a way, but they should know better, too, I think," he said. "There's other ways to get up here. You don't have to sneak."

But he also said he liked those in the Mexican community, including three young men who live next door. He hasn't seen another group of Hispanic men that live in a house across the street, he assumed Wednesday that they had fled the area.

"I didn't see any lights on last night," Wedo said.

But the men are still there, said Santiago Salvador, who lives down the street. They've been hiding inside since Monday.

"In past days, I'd walk down the street and say hi to my people. Now my neighbors are gone. It's sad," he said.

Salvador and his family arrived a month ago from Guatemala on tourist visas. They planned to find jobs once they obtained proper paperwork. Now, they intend to go home, perhaps as soon as this weekend.